

OBITUARY

John Peter William Rivers 1945 – 1989

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John Peter William Rivers died on December 2nd 1989 after almost a year's fight with cancer. The loss of this brilliant and ebullient man is felt by a worldwide network of friends and colleagues, as well as by a generation of students. But it is most acutely felt by those of us who, together with John, were involved in creating systematic disaster studies.

This journal was started by John, a

founder member of the London Technical Group which was the forerunner of both the International Disaster Institute and the Relief and Development Institute. It was John who persuaded a sceptical Robert Maxwell, the first publisher of the journal, to invest in what seemed at the time a somewhat fringe academic interest. John's editorial in the first issue in 1977 was characteristic of his style and his hopes:

We hope that this Journal will cease its publication as soon as possible. . . . This Journal is about disasters and the way they affect human populations . . . When there is no further role for science in disaster relief, when there are no more catastrophes we will have to cease publication . . .

The philosophy of this Journal . . . is a conviction that people die in disaster chiefly because insufficient money is spent on saving lives. Given this, the limited money available can be spent more, or less, wisely. Wisdom in this context can only be arrived at by the application of science.

The title *Disasters*, proposed by John and seized upon by Maxwell, had its critics. John answered them:

It has been suggested that in titling the Journal *Disasters* we are inviting description of experiments that failed. We are . . . we feel that discussion of approaches to disaster relief

that failed is as fruitful an experience as boasting of those which succeeded.

For several years during the 1970s John's interest and involvement in disaster research centred on the, at times, ludicrous nutritional standards and policy that guided food relief. With Seaman and Holt, amongst others, he carried out the first systematic survey of famine in northern Ethiopia in late 1973. This resulted in a seminal publication entitled "Harerghe Under Drought" and many subsequent papers. As one of his colleagues later said, it was not the intention of this survey to lay the foundations of famine prediction, but to find out who was starving, why and where they were. Nevertheless, this special partnership of minds and friendship did in fact create the basis for what is today not only a theory of famine causation, but a policy adopted by the major food aid donors. The idea that famine, of all the so called natural disasters, is preventable if there is early information and appropriate action was quite alien to donors working in Africa. Famine was still largely regarded as one of the biblical scourges and the work of relief agencies was to feed the poor in ever increasing numbers without questioning its origins.

The flood of studies which have followed the Ethiopian famine of 1983–5 demonstrates two aspects central to John's concerns: that the evidence of impending famine was abundant if you looked for it and that inaction on the part of the International Humanitarian Community was due more to politics than to a dearth of information.

John's abiding interest, however, was in comparative nutrition and his ten years as lecturer and then head of the Centre for Human Nutrition at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine increasingly led him away from direct disaster research. It is for others to assess his work in this field, but it is perhaps fitting that John's last publication concerned an analysis of the

inadequacies of the diet of refugees in Ethiopia — a study which led to a radical re-appraisal of UN policy on food rations and which immediately reduced the outbreak of scurvy amongst the 300,000 refugees. John suggested ways in which Vitamin C could be introduced into the diet. In the last few weeks of his life the problem of inadequate rations was at last officially acknowledged at the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as well as by the Inter-agency Governing Committee of the United Nations.

These interests and achievements, however, barely touch on the complexity of the man. He was a mentor, a gifted teacher, a poet, a true and generous friend and a deeply loved husband and father. He had an irreverent wit and the much worn phrase "he didn't bear fools gladly" (generally a euphemism for ill temper) was, in John's case, entirely apt. In one of his earliest contributions to *Nature* — a critique of the long awaited and prestigious Neuberger Report on nutritional policy — he referred to the 'arcane' attitudes of his scientific elders: this and his refusal to recant nearly cost him his research fellowship at the Nuffield Institute of Comparative Medicine of the Zoological Society of London. Rather than couch his impatience with woolly theories in measured tones, he was outspoken at various meetings and conferences. His criticisms were often *ad hominem* and for these he was regarded with some suspicion and certainly, by some, with apprehension!

Constantly set back by severe epilepsy, which eventually restricted his travel abroad, John achieved more than most. These achievements are measured not by publications alone but also by the time and wisdom he was prepared to give to anyone who needed it. One could turn up at his crammed office at the Centre for Human Nutrition and be guaranteed what amounted to a brilliant seminar on life,

politics or science — and often all three.

John, his wife Andrea and their three children created a home in South London which was a centre of activity, ideas and warmth. He died at home surrounded by his family which he so dearly loved. During his eleven months' fight with a brain tumour the family dealt with his growing incapacity with love, honesty and dignity. The loss of the man is still shocking to everyone fortunate enough to have known him, but most of all to his family. After his death there have been discussions on how best to commemorate him. His wife believes that John's legacy was his courage in

speaking out against injustice wherever it occurred. His memory will continue as long as there are others prepared to do the same. This Journal was one forum for such attempts to change policy in favour of the disadvantaged and its survival is, in itself, a lasting tribute to a remarkable man.

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